It's the end of the world as we know it

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Body

These past few weeks, it's seemed to me that every news alert portends the apocalypse, which will crash down on us in waves of ever-increasing frequency, natural disaster after natural disaster, until finally Nature has washed the Earth clean of our hubris. Yes, I'm being dramatic. But half the country is on fire; Houston just sank underwater like Atlantis, if people in Atlantis had to worry about floating hordes of fire ants; India, Nepal and Bangladesh are dealing with even more severe flooding; and there are three hurricanes in the Gulf of Mexico. So, give me a break.

It's pretty clear that climate change is a contributor to this confluence of once-in-a-lifetime disaster events and that the worst is barely beginning. Even if we can drastically reduce carbon emissions, we will be dealing with the effects of the damage we have already caused for a long, long time. There are proposals that could help reduce the toll climate change will take, like removing carbon from the air directly, blanketing part of the Sahara in solar panels to eliminate our dependence on fossil fuels and collectively grabbing a bendy straw and slurping up the rising waters. (My own idea. Constructive criticism not accepted.)

Still, none of the innovations that could stop or even reverse climate change are ready for implementation, and as Hurricanes Irma and Harvey and the fires in the West Coast prove, we can't afford to wait for a miracle solution. Despite my earlier fatalism, I don't want to sit around waiting for sea levels to rise-partly because I'm from a coast and it would be inconvenient for me, personally, if my house were underwater, and partly because I realize that it would also be overall just, you know, not good.

If you live somewhere where you would not be personally impacted by this and are motivated primarily by naked self-interest, I would like to remind you that you probably still reside in a place that is vulnerable to tornadoes, floods, landslides or wildfires. Climate change will almost certainly increase the frequency and severity of these events. Plus, when we coastal elites flee the encroaching water, we will have to go somewhere, and that somewhere might be your hometown, where we will inevitably complain a lot and be generally annoying.

So, now we're all in agreement that climate change is bad. Presumably, we also agree that we should try to fix it by employing some good old-fashioned ingenuity and cooperation or possibly by blowing up the moon to see if that helps. But while we're working on reversing climate change, what do we do to make its impact on our collective lives as minimal as possible?

My best (and most boring) answer is to invest in infrastructure. Lots and lots of infrastructure. Ideally, environmentally friendly infrastructure, which won't compound the problem it's meant to solve. Basically, we need to build cities that can weather a storm like Harvey or Irma, which means better drainage systems, roads that can handle mass evacuations if necessary and sewers that won't fill the streets with actual rivers of s- during floods (this is a real, serious worry about Irma). We need towns that won't sink into the ocean when sea levels rise, or wipe off the map after a landslide or collapse into rubble when a tornado hits. We need as many civil engineers working on these problems as we have people like me writing about them. (Side note: Why doesn't Wash. U. have a civil

engineering major? I know it's not as sexy or attention-grabbing as, say, software engineering, but I'd like to see a self-driving car try to get somewhere without any roads or bridges).

My proposal, in essence, is that the government-and corporations and citizens- pour resources into the biggest infrastructure project this country has ever seen, ensuring America will be habitable in the coming decades. Of course, infrastructure won't do much to protect us from some of the other effects of climate change, like drought, famine and disease, but as survival experts say, first shelter, then water, then food, then medicine to treat the terrifying plagues lurking just beneath the ice.

As for how exactly to make our cities and towns climate-proof, I'll have to get back to you. It would certainly be expensive, and time-consuming, and require a mobilization of resources and manpower that would make the New Deal look like kindergarten art class. Luckily, we as a country have a history of devoting mind-boggling amounts of money to national security, and climate change is undoubtedly the biggest threat to our national security. Instead of setting aside trillions for the defense of the country, maybe we should be making sure there's something left to defend.

Unfortunately, it doesn't look like a massive infrastructure overhaul is happening anytime soon. Of the trillion dollars President Donald Trump promised to set aside for infrastructure (still not enough), only $200 billion has been allocated for the next 10 years (definitely not enough). The state of infrastructure in the U.S is already woeful, and the current administration does not seem to believe in climate change, let alone in devoting a significant portion of the budget to combating it. The administration should be interested, though, because an infrastructure overhaul would create thousands of jobs and prove that the government can get literally anything done.

Still, the potential economic and political benefits would just be icing on the cake of getting to continue to inhabit vast swathes of the country. Amid all the national angst about the end of the world, we forget that we actually have to live until them. I would rather do so in a relatively functional city than in the rubble of a postapocalyptic wasteland. But that's just me.

Tags: climate change, Infrastructure, Pessimism

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